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SUBJECT: ENGAGING VIETNAM ON BURMA AND ASEAN

REF: A. STATE 50205; B. 04 HANOI 2795; C. KUALA LUMPUR 1097

11. (SBU) DCM John Boardman, accompanied by Poloff, met with Acting Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs for ASEAN Affairs Nguyen Duy Hung March 28. Drawing from reftel talking points, the DCM asked Hung his thoughts on Burma's chairmanship of ASEAN.

12. (SBU) The DCM suggested that the issue of Burma's 2006 chairmanship of ASEAN would come up in the April Foreign Ministers' meeting in Cebu. Hung nodded in apparent agreement, but noted that this issue is not on any of the agendas that have been circulated so far. Hung said that the United States is "an important dialogue partner" for ASEAN and "plays an important role in the ASEAN framework, especially at the ASEAN Regional Forum and the Post Ministerial Conference."

13. (SBU) Hung noted the USG's concerns that an "unsettled situation" in Burma would make it difficult for the United States to participate in ASEAN events chaired by Burma. "There is plenty of time until 2006," he said, "and many improving steps are currently being taken by the Myanmar government." Hung recited a few of the Burmese regime's talking points about the convening of the National Convention and the seven-point roadmap, but acknowledged the "concerns of the United States and others" regarding the situation in Burma. "The wish and hope of Vietnam are that the situation in Myanmar will be stabilized, and they will have peace and continue to develop."

14. (SBU) Regardless of how events unfold in Burma, Hung said, the dominant principle is the "ASEAN policy of non-intervention in internal affairs" and said that whatever occurs would be settled "in the ASEAN way," much as the issue of Burmese participation in the Asia-Europe Meeting summit in Hanoi in October 2004 had been. Poloff noted that, while the ASEM summit (ref B) had ultimately been successful, almost all of the international press attention on the event was focused on the issue of whether ASEAN's inability to deal with Burma's internal problems would prevent European leaders from attending. Under current conditions, the controversy over Burma's chairmanship would probably draw attention away from the real accomplishments of ASEAN and the important development goals of the region's 500 million people. Hung agreed that this would be unfortunate, but said that because Burma is a full member of ASEAN, it has the right to expect other members to abide by the basic principles of the organization and help make its 2006 chairmanship a success. "Many things can change between now and then," Hung concluded. "Who knows, perhaps the United States' policies will change."

15. (SBU) Comment: The GVN got a clear picture of the liability to ASEAN that Burma represents in the lead-up to the ASEM Summit in Hanoi last year. Nailing down the compromise between the Europeans and the Burmese that ultimately allowed the Hanoi summit to take place according to schedule was a huge effort, and it distracted from the message Vietnam hoped to send about Vietnam's and ASEAN's diplomatic and economic relevance. That negative experience, however, did not convince Vietnam to abandon its steadfast defense of the non-interference doctrine, and Vietnam has so far not joined Malaysia's reported calls for Burma to step aside in 2006 (ref C).

16. (SBU) Comment continued: Acting Assistant Minister Hung expressed his understanding of Vietnam's role as the "bridge" between ASEAN's older members and the newer ones of Burma, Laos and Cambodia, and the GVN seems to recognize that Vietnam will not be able to stand on the sidelines in this debate. This suggests that despite its protestations about "the ASEAN way" and "non interference in internal affairs" the GVN may be receptive to further discussions with us on this issue.

MARINE